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ABSTRACT

The teaching activity presented in this pamphlet intends to show elementary teachers how to produce better signs, posters, and displays, and how to improve graphic communication throughout the school. Beginning with a discussion of the intended purpose of a display and ways to make graphic messages succeed, the pamphlet lists necessary equipment and materials; discusses lettering (kinds and techniques); tells how to make successful posters; and relates sources of ideas, material, equipment, and help. (EL)

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Better Displays: A Teachers' Guide to Materials and Techniques

Walter McVitty

PETA

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P.E.N.
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Better Displays

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A teachers' guide to materials and techniques

The aim of this P.E.N. is to show teachers how to produce better signs, posters and displays, and how to improve graphic communication throughout the school generally.

WE USE many ways of communicating ideas to people. We write, we speak, we use body language. We paint, compose music, write plays, make films, use television and radio.

In our society we are bombarded constantly with visual messages. In advertising, these messages are devised carefully and structured to have maximum impact — to sell the viewer something, be it an idea, an image or a product. Such messages often are presented in highly sophisticated — and essentially *simple* — ways. And they are effective usually — they *work* — because of the careful thought and skill which goes into their conception and execution. The advertisers have a clear aim in view and they know a good deal about their audience. The secret of their success resides in the fact that they have clear, strong, definite and unequivocal aims in mind at the outset, and the strategies they choose to employ to achieve these aims are, in fact, determined *by* them.

A school, too, needs to communicate visual messages and information within its own community — to achieve *its* aims. As with society at large, a school uses signs, posters and displays of one kind or another, in classrooms, corridors, libraries, staffrooms, reception areas — sometimes even in local shop windows. It uses notice boards, various signs, banners, glass display cases etc.

Some areas make a deliberate feature of displays for self promotion — to "sell" children on the idea of getting to know what services and goods they offer. A school library, for instance, will want to promote the reading of particular books, or particular authors, or books about special themes, such as sport, animals, seasons, festivals etc. Such displays aim not only to *inform* their audience about available resources but to *motivate* that audience to **use** these resources. There is always a **purpose** behind such displays.

The same should be true of all visual communication attempted within the school environment.

Teachers should take careful note of the ways in which graphic messages succeed in society at large and try to discover how they seem to work in achieving their aims. Look at the huge advertising hoardings around you, with their subtle but unambiguous messages. Look at the display windows of the very best department stores. What they usually have in common is their **simplicity.** They are never cluttered, never illegible, never obscure.

Now have a look at any signs, posters, displays in your classroom. Look at the signs, posters and displays around the school. (Worse still, go and have a look at the staffroom noticeboard!) How do they rate? If the comparison is not good, *NOW is the time to do something about it!*

Equipment
you will need...

Before you start...

A good grasp of basic techniques of graphic communication is one thing, but equally important is the working out of such things as *what* you want to do, *why* you want to do it, for *whom* and in *what ways* may it best be done. Would-be communicators need to ask questions such as the following:

- What are we trying to communicate? What is to be the intended effect? *(Why do I want to display all these sports trophies?)*
- Where is the best place to achieve this effect? Near the Principal's Office? *(Is the administrative precinct the right place? Why?)*
- Who will be the audience? *(Who will be the people most likely to be using this area? Is this the audience we really want to reach?)*
- How shall we communicate? *(Is a glass case full of trophies enough to achieve my aims?)*

Remember...

- **A single message** or theme is more effective than a multiple one. (Check out the single-message posters which teenagers buy for their own bedrooms!)
- Do not leave the same display in the one place for too long. People tend not to notice things which have become too familiar. Mount new displays or move existing ones to other locations. (Why not share with other schools?)
- **Involve children** in the making of signs, posters and displays. They are often excellent suppliers of raw materials and enjoy being involved in the execution of such tasks, especially if they have a real purpose.
- Arrange a **program** of displays for special weeks and festivals throughout the year, e.g. National Aborigines' Week, Children's Book Week, Anzac Day, Easter etc.

Double-sided adhesive tape. Useful for mounting pictures and lettering onto cardboard. The tape is protected by paper on each side. To use, peel protective paper off one side of tape, stick to back of picture, peel off remaining protective paper (now facing upwards) and position picture carefully by pressing onto cardboard. The resulting bond is usually permanent, so care must be taken when affixing.

Glue sticks. These come in tubes (like lipstick) and are excellent for mounting small signs and photographs because the adhesive is dry and does not wrinkle paper. The bond is not always permanent, and so items can be re-arranged at will. By the same token, items might come loose if not pressed firmly to host surface.

P.V.A. adhesive, such as "Bookaide" or "Aquadhere". These water-soluble adhesives are used to stick paper, cloth etc. to cardboard, wood etc. They may also be used to repair breaks in polystyrene foam. Remember to keep airtight — and avoid getting it on hands or clothes (wash off immediately).

Blu-Tac. A soft, putty-like substance used for temporary mounting of posters onto walls. No damage is caused, no marks are left, and the Blu-Tac is re-usable.

Staple gun. Extremely useful, effective and time-saving tool for affixing fabric, posters, pictures, lettering etc. to display boards.

Pressure-pak spray adhesive. Good for bonding cardboard, paper, wood, photographs, plastic, prints, fabrics etc. For *temporary* bonds, spray one surface only, allow to dry, then press onto mounting surface. For *permanent* bonds, spray both surfaces, allow them to become tacky, then press together. (You'll need lots of sheets of scrap paper to use as backing while spraying.)

Pins. Sewing pins, drawing pins, and window dressing or "corsage" pins are used for affixing artwork to display boards. Coloured mapping pins may be used for decorative effect.

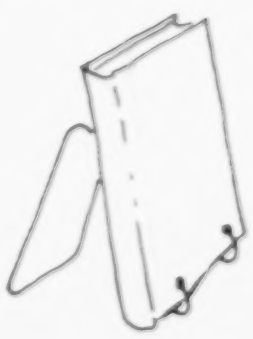
Tack hammer. For driving in pins.

Long-nosed pliers. For removing pins.

Scissors. Long-bladed scissors are best, but need to be sharp. Pinking shears may be used to give decorative edges to paper.

Fabric. Velvet, Thai silk, cotton etc. all make attractive backing for display boards and good bases for table-top displays. They can be used over and over again. Old curtains might be useful, too. Choose fabrics to suit mood of display, e.g. velvet offers richness and flowing curves, while gingham gives a "country" look. The coarseness of hessian makes an especially appealing neutral but textured background.

Nylon Fishing Line. This is extremely useful for hanging signs, pictures and mobiles because it is very strong and is almost invisible — although there is an art in tying knots in it!



Plastic-covered wire bookstands. These are useful not only for holding books upright but also for pictures and signs.

Cork bricks. These are lightweight, have interesting colour and texture and may be arranged in many combinations and used over and over again. They may be fixed to walls or used as bases to display books and pictures but, more usually, solid objects arranged at different heights.

Cement bricks (hollow). These can be arranged to make interesting combinations of units, with varying heights, which act as stands for signs, models, books and other objects.

Crepe paper. This makes an inexpensive background to displays; it comes in a range of colours, is easy to handle and is re-usable.

Chalk. Good for ensuring even alignment of signs and lettering on display boards, especially if applied by twanging a taut, chalk-dusted length of string along the appropriate line. The chalk can be dusted off when lettering is completed.

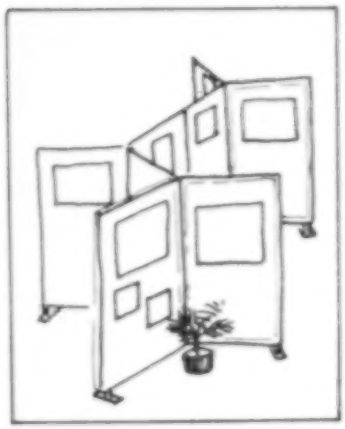
Clothes pegs. These can be used to hang art work, dust jackets of books, posters, signs etc. from a line strung across the room.

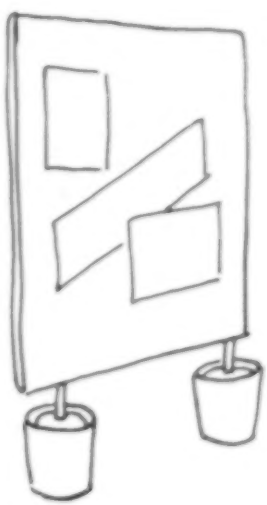
Cardboard tubes. These make good label holders.

Wallpaper. Your local supplier might give you sample books, especially if outdated or damaged, and will sell you superseded, end-of-run rolls quite cheaply. Wallpaper makes excellent background for displays but is also effective, in its wide range of pattern and textures, as a novelty idea for cut-out silhouettes of objects or letters on display boards.

Fish net. This is a great standby for restaurants and shop window displays. Used draped, or taut, as a display background, or suspended as an area divider. Any coarse netting (e.g. onion sacks) will do just as well.

Cardboard. This can be obtained free from supermarkets, milk-bars, wine shops and various other stores. *Corrugated* cardboard makes an excellent three-dimensional background when used as display backing on walls or display boards; pictures, posters and signs can easily be attached to it, using small pins.





Home-made screen; dowel posts in sand-filled containers

Screens. Office suppliers carry a range of free-standing screens and display panels. They are not difficult to make, using Cane-ite covered in coarse fabric or fine hessian. Such screens can be suspended from ceilings. If free-standing, they need to be firm and self-supporting. A good idea is to attach screen to two battens (or thick dowelling, such as broom handles) and drive them into sand-filled buckets or canisters.

Wine casks. These come in a variety of sizes, are strong yet light, and make excellent props for displays. They can be covered in coloured or patterned paper, used as stands, or hung from mobiles — with a different picture or message on each "face".

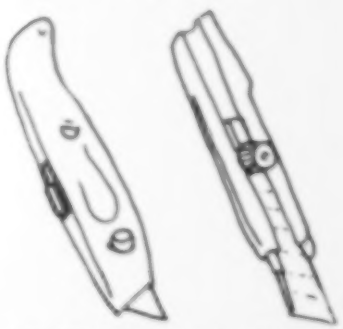
Felt-tipped markers. These come in a large range of colours and widths. Edding make a super width "deko pen" with a tip 4cm. wide, making it excellent for quick signwriting. It is also refillable. The range is wide; you will need to experiment with a number of different shapes and sizes — some have pointy tips, others are wedge-shaped for lettering.

Pentil Someil Dying Pastels. Use these to draw the desired image directly onto fabric (e.g. T-shirts), fix by ironing. The result is completely washable and permanent. Good for banners, signs, slogans etc.

Pressure-pak spray paint. Good for filling in stencils of letters and objects, or spraying around templates to leave silhouettes of shapes. Hold can 20-25cm. from surface; spray evenly and sparingly, in well ventilated area.

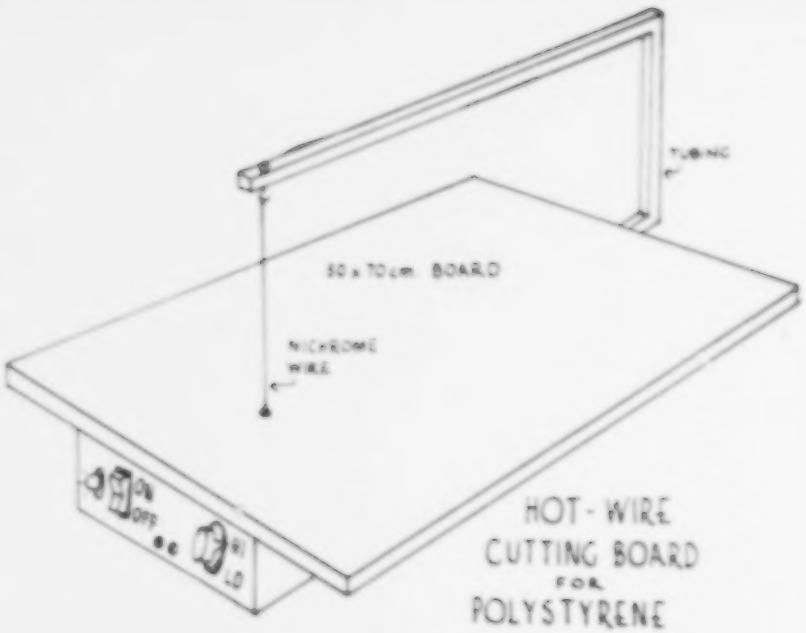
Letter templates and/or **stencils.** These are commercially available, in art-supply shops and some newsagents, in a range of styles and shapes. Alternatively, you can make your own, building up a "bank" of them.

Overhead projector. These are invaluable for enlarging small line-drawings. These are traced first onto transparencies (a shirt-box lid will do) and then projected onto a wall on which a large sheet of blank card or paper has been attached. You need only draw around the projected image, as it now appears in its enlarged state, and you have a perfectly proportioned enlargement of the original.

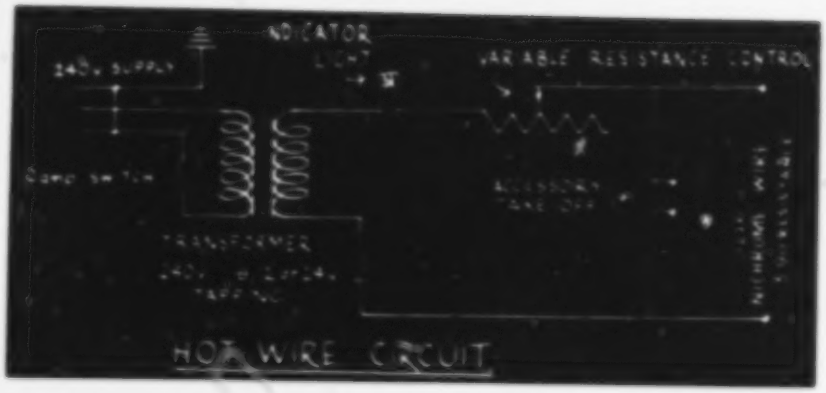


L. Binder's knife with retractable blade
R. Cutter with snap-off blades

Cutting knife. Stanley knives are useful for cutting cardboard, while the newer cutters (wallpaper knives) with retractable blades, and "snap-off" blades (sections may be broken off as they become worn) are very useful for cutting paper, cloth, film etc. They are handy for cutting out templates and stencils and will cut polystyrene if a long length of blade is used in a sawing motion.



HOT-WIRE CUTTING BOARD FOR POLYSTYRENE



Polystyrene. This is so widely used in large-scale packaging that most people are glad to get rid of it. It is an easily worked material and has the advantage of interesting texture, thickness and lightness (although it can break easily). When painting, use water-based paint (poster or acrylic). The texture of the polystyrene surface produces interesting effects, especially if cut to form dragons or other scaly animals or monsters.

Draw outline of object on foam, using a "Chinagraph" pencil. If using foam for lettering, use letter templates for best results, attaching them to surface with dressmaking pins. Cut out desired shape using (warmed up) hot-wire machine, pressing foam gently and evenly against wire.

Because of the foam's thickness, it is a good idea to paint the sides a dark colour, to emphasise its three-dimensional quality. Attach foam cut-outs to display boards, using long pins fixed at an angle through the sides.

If using cut-out foam objects as part of mobiles, paint the image on *both* sides for double effect. Alternatively, paint the obverse side black, for silhouette effect. Objects may be suspended from mobile frame by using fishing line threaded through a small hole pierced through foam by a fine screwdriver, ice-pick or long nail.

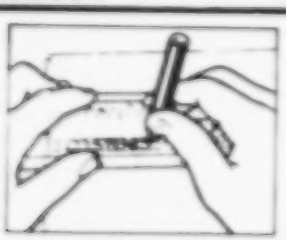
Repair breakages with P.V.A. adhesives such as "Book Aide" and "Aquadhere".

Lettering...

This often appears to be the most difficult aspect of making successful displays, but it need not be. A quite professional finish can be achieved by the beginner by using any of a number of ready-made alternatives to doing-it-yourself.

Stencils. Art suppliers carry a range of different cut-out designs and sizes of stencils, which can be used again and again. Paint brushes, broad felt-tipped pens or sprays are used to fill in the area left by the stencil cut-out. Alternatively, by copying standard stencil sets and making your own, using a cutting knife with retractable blade, you can achieve the same result without cost. Different sizes of lettering can be achieved, using the overhead projector as an enlarging medium.

Ruler-stencils. Transparent "rulers" may be bought, in varying sizes, with letter-shapes cut into them. Fine felt-tipped pens may be used with these, although they are meant for use with drawing pens, which must be held *vertically* to achieve best results. One problem is the danger of ink blotches if the nib is not kept clean or if the ruler rests too firmly on the paper. Furthermore, correct spacing is



difficult to achieve; it is very much a matter of trial-and-error. Probably the best procedure is to stencil the letters in pencil first, going over them in ink only when satisfied that spacing is correct. (Even so, such lettering can look cold, mechanical and impersonal, in contrast to well-executed freehand lettering.)

Templates. These also are commercially available for tracing outlines of letters and, possibly, filling them in with paint or felt-tipped pen. Alternatively, coloured paper may be used for letters. If you need even larger letters, trace them onto acetate and enlarge by using an overhead projector.

Magnetic letters also look good — although restricted to suitably metallic surfaces in the display itself. They are three dimensional, of course, and are available in a range of bright colours, from school suppliers.

Polystyrene pre-cut letters. These come in different sizes and are very neat and legible. Their three-dimensional quality adds depth and extra visual appeal to any display. They are expensive to buy (try Oswald Sealey) but, used often over many years, should be looked on as a long-term, time-saving investment in quality.

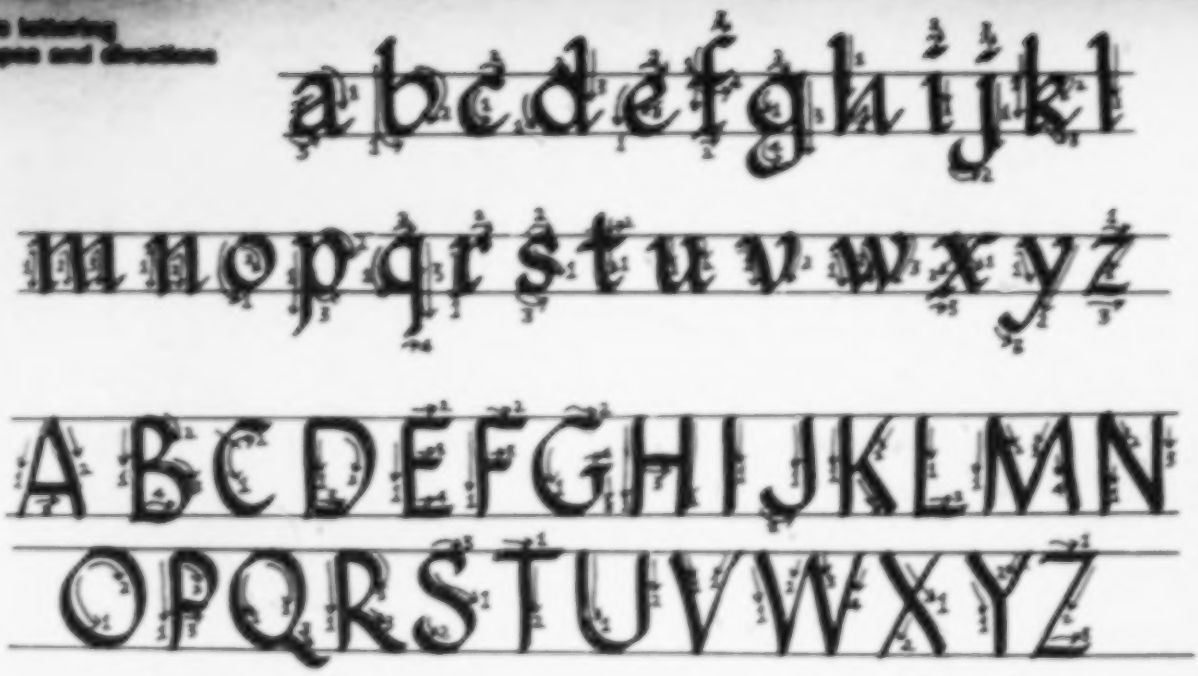
Dry-transfer sheets, such as Letraset and Geotype, are expensive, but give excellent results. The range of designs is vast, and is not confined to letters — there are decorative borders, drawings of cars, people, trees, signs, patterns (e.g. brickwork, tiles) symbols, rules and borders (the latter also come in tapes, with dispensers, as well as flat sheets). Correct spacing of letters is aided by a special marking system which allows for differences in letter shapes.

Letrasigns and **Geosigns** are large, die-cut, self-adhesive PVC letters with a split backing which makes permanent fixing an easy two-step operation. Although expensive, the results are excellent. An inexpensive alternative is to make your own letters on coloured "Contact" adhesive shelf-lining/book-covering material, using templates of letters (e.g. from newspaper poster/placards).

Newspaper posters/placards, of the type displayed daily outside newsagencies. There is an unending supply of these, which your newsagent will probably be happy to give you. The letters are large, and uniform in size and style. Pasted onto cardboard or polystyrene and then cut out, using a cutting knife with retractable blade, these could form a permanent bank of re-usable letters, large in size and very readable.

Going one step further, you can cut out letters from an assortment of such placard/posters to make your own recycled newspaper placards/posters — which are sure to be of eye-catching, novelty appeal if you pitch their message at your audience.

Applying Letraset
1. Press character in place with fingertip
2. Transfer by use of burnisher
3. Burnish well for a final bond
4. Removal of errors and Spacematic bars
5-6. Pre-release method
7-9. Spacematic letter-spacing method



Do-it-yourself. The easiest way to produce consistently good lettering at little or no cost is through doing it yourself. All you need is a broad felt-tipped pen with which to practise the shapes and the strokes necessary to achieve such shapes, including an understanding of the order of making such strokes for each letter-shape. A free hand comes only with practice. The secret is to keep the felt tip (or steel-nib, if using pen) always at the same angle, which is about 45° off the page, the holder pointing over your shoulder. The width of the tip will determine the appearance of the resulting letters, being thick or thin according to the movement of the tip or nib — which is always constant in pressure, the direction of movement being the only variable. It is essential also to understand that the felt tip or pen nib is always freely "dragged" rather than "pushed" — it should flow over the paper and not dig into it at any point. The numbers on the chart show you the order of hand movements for each letter, to ensure fluency and avoid "digging" into your surface.

An excellent way to get into the swing of such lettering, when starting out, is to practise the shapes and movements with a full stick of chalk on your classroom chalkboard. Use your whole arm in free, swinging movements to produce large thick/thin letters. Hold the chalk lengthwise, thumb at one end and index finger at the other. At its thickest, the resulting lettering will be as thick as the stick of chalk is long; the thinnest part of the stroke will be as thick as the stick of chalk itself. The secret, as with pens, lies in keeping the chalk *always* at the same angle (i.e. 45° from the baseline).

Typewriters. Do not overlook these as sources of good (but small) legible lettering. Your office typewriter might be able to produce lettering suitable for display purposes, simply by using the largest available typeface — and perhaps spacing it out more than usual.

Word-processors/Printers. These can produce quite large-scale lettering, in different shapes. If the results, as printed out, seem too light to attract attention, simply colour in the letter shapes with felt-tipped pens.

Dymo labels. These are useful where small amounts of lettering are required, e.g. captions.

Make your own stencil. Trace these letters on card, cut out shapes. For larger sizes, trace on acetate sheet and use overhead projector.

Posters...

A poster's main purpose is to communicate information — an idea or a message. As people usually glimpse posters only momentarily, in passing, this information therefore must be presented clearly and succinctly, if it is to succeed in communicating at all.

In most cases it is hoped that a poster will create a favourable reaction so that the viewer will do something as a result of it — join a club, borrow a book, attend a fete, show a better attitude toward minority groups, schoolground litter etc.

A successful poster . . .

- attracts attention
- emphasises the most important points
- reads easily
- looks pleasing

When designing posters, always bear the above four points in mind. Ask yourself if the inclusion of an item X will contribute in some way to meeting these criteria. If it doesn't, leave it out.

Designing a Poster...

- Simplicity is obviously the keynote.
- Stick to conveying one idea.
- Do not clutter it up: keep words to a minimum.
- Keep messages positive: neither admonish, moralise nor harangue.
- Use as little punctuation as possible. Full stops should be used only when necessary to avoid confusion of meaning; usually they are not needed at the end of your "sentence" or message.

Leave space around message

- Cursive handwriting can be used for variety or emphasis — but don't use it for a complete poster.
- Leave enough space around the edges of the poster message: do not run your lettering to the edge of the sheet, as this makes it harder to read. Space itself has to be managed, to work for the poster as a whole.
- You can slant words — but slant them upwards, not down.

- Leave enough space between lines of lettering — at least a third of the capital-letter height being used.
- Leave enough space between words.
- Do rough lay-outs first, to arrive at a design which works best.
- Affix coloured paper "infant squares" to poster for special "patch" effects, as background for lettering etc. They needn't remain square — cut them into shapes, such as triangles or circles, if this will help achieve an effect.
- Lettering must contrast with its background.
- Colours may be classified as warm or cool. Most shades of blue, green and lemon (and white) are cool; red, orange, purple and brown are warm. Colour can be used to suggest a particular idea or mood. (Note how advertisements for menthol cigarettes always appear in cool colours, for instance). Some colours are not very compatible by themselves, e.g. red and green. The use of a third colour or tone (usually white) will help make clashing colours harmonise.
- A picture may be enlarged free-hand, by drawing squares over the original (or on a transparent paper overlay) and copying onto the poster (or other sheet of paper) on which larger squares have been drawn. After the resulting picture has been completed (inked, painted) erase all pencil marks.

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Sources of Supply...

If your school has a good Library/Resource Centre and an Art Centre, they will be **the** most valuable sources of ideas, material, equipment and help. There are many other sources of material, much of which may be free.

- If you live in a large city you will have access to most of the supplies you will need through local **newsagents** and stationers. Better still are the specialist shops selling artists' materials (check your Yellow Pages for addresses).
- Some cities have "**Reverse Garbage**" organisations, which are a boon to imaginative teachers. These organisations supply all manner of oddments and scraps (cardboard, polystyrene etc.) discarded by manufacturers. (See telephone directory.)
- Suppliers of school and educational materials stock alphabet templates, stencils and a range of other useful display items.
- Library suppliers, such as **Raeco** and **S.&M.**, are also good for display-making equipment. As well as marker pens, cutters, Con-tact and the like, they also sell display panels and moveable stands. They publish illustrated catalogues of their wares each year.
- If you live in a capital city, pay a visit to the showroom of **Oswald Sealy**. You will be truly amazed at what you find. Oswald Sealy is a specialist retailer of commercially-used display material. Have you ever wondered where that green paper "grass" in your butcher shop windows comes from? Or the SALE tickets used by stores? Or those phoney "beer barrels" affixed to walls of hotel lounges — or indeed their illustrated signs for toilets? Oswald Sealy is the place. At these showrooms you can buy a fascinating range of items, such as the following, used by display artists, window-dressers, decorators etc.
  - die-cut polystyrene letters, in various sizes, polystyrene spheres, also
  - coloured and decorated paper, card, trim, wrapping paper, ribbon
  - large feathers
  - dried arrangements (flowers, leaves, nuts, berries etc.)
  - Thin plastic-moulded "food" realistic-looking lobsters, whole fish, clams etc. (separately or in mixed packs), large wedges of cheese (various kinds), bunches of grapes, strings of fruit, loaves of bread, salami etc. etc.
  - soft toys, ducks, sheep etc.
  - ship models
  - realistic imitations of birds, made from real feathers.

Paper witch, with fold-around hat (Oswald Sealy)

- **Tap local sources** for materials. Supermarkets, travel agents, milk bars, newsagents, electrical goods shops and furniture stores are endless suppliers of cartons, cardboard, photographs, posters, polystyrene.
- Write to embassies, airlines, shipping companies etc. for posters and large photographs of other countries. Australian wildlife, sports events etc. Government and semi-government authorities are excellent sources of display materials. Try Commonwealth departments such as Aboriginal Affairs, Health, Defence, Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. In each State, valuable display and poster material may be obtained from departments such as Agriculture (has many divisions), National Parks and Wildlife, Railways etc. Telecom, Australia Post, Board of Works are examples of others. Banks and large businesses can provide a wealth of display material, too. For full and up-to-date information on sources of free (or inexpensive) materials in Australia, see the current edition of the *How and Why Directory*, published by the School Libraries Division (NSW) of the Library Association of Australia.
- If the **State Museum** in your capital city has an education section, you may find that it will let you borrow objects (e.g. fossils, stuffed birds, charts) for use in school displays.

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